

TESTIMONY OF DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
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ON THE WESTERN SAHARA
BEFORE THE AFRICA SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
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Mr. Chairman, distinguished Members, I am honored to have the opportunity to appear before you regarding the Western Sahara. This issue, spanning the past quarter century, continues to constitute a destabilizing element in the region and an impediment to regional cooperation, as well as an ongoing humanitarian issue. I would like to address first U.S. interests in the Western Sahara; second, recent developments; and third, prospects for U.S. policy.

A durable, peaceful settlement of this dispute would enhance the stability of the Maghreb, as well as the stability of the Mediterranean Basin more generally, and the Sahel. A settlement offers the prospect of strengthening political, economic, commercial, and counter-terrorism cooperation for the Maghreb and Sahel regions. Unresolved, this dispute significantly impedes regional integration and leaves the Sahrawi people with a bleak and uncertain future. If the situation were to deteriorate, it could bring new suffering and hardship, threaten political and economic reform trends in Algeria and Morocco, and pose serious risks for the stability of the Maghreb, with implications for Southern Europe.

With these interests at stake, we continue to support strongly the efforts of the United Nations to resolve the Western Sahara issue. We remain committed to a durable, peaceful, and mutually acceptable resolution of this long-running dispute. This can only happen with the full cooperation of all the parties with the United Nations, and with each other. Recent developments, including the appointment of Peter van Walsum as the Secretary General's new Personal Envoy, underscore our view that the United Nations remains the appropriate venue for resolving the dispute and we have every confidence in its ability to do so.

Turning now to the recent developments I alluded to above, I am sorry to report that there has been little movement toward resolving the dispute since the State Department last testified before this body in September of 2000.

Our hope that the series of talks brokered by former Secretary of State James Baker would lead to a resolution has not been realized. The fruit of these talks, the Baker Peace Plan, first presented in 2003, and which the UN Security Council called “an optimal solution,” retained aspects of the earlier Settlement and Framework Agreements, but included a period of Sahrawi autonomy prior to a referendum on self-determination. The Plan was accepted by the Polisario Front and the Algerian government, but rejected by the Moroccan government.

In June 2004, James Baker resigned as Personal Envoy following a seven-year effort to assist the parties in crafting an agreement. The Secretary General asked Alvaro de Soto, his Special Representative for the Western Sahara from August 2003 to May 2005, to continue working with the parties following Mr. Baker’s resignation.

The summer of 2004 also saw a dramatic downturn in Moroccan-Algerian relations sparked by a series of miscues, beginning with Algeria’s tepid response to Morocco’s unannounced lifting of visa requirements for Algerian nationals. SRSG de Soto embarked on consultations with the parties in this less than fertile climate, but was quickly and consistently rebuffed by both the Algerian Government and the Polisario Front.

Poor relations between Morocco and Algeria culminated in a bitter public display at the United Nations 4th Committee in October 2004, where, for the first time, the Committee’s resolution on the Western Sahara was not passed by consensus. The U.S., France, Spain, UK, and Russia abstained in this vote.

In October 2004, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to extend MINURSO’s mandate for six months, with a request that the Secretary General provide a report on the situation before the end of the mandate and provide an interim report on evolution of the situation and the mission’s size and concept of operation.

Early spring 2005 brought the hope of a thaw in Moroccan-Algerian relations, when King Mohammed attended the Arab League Summit in Algiers and stayed on for a one-on-one meeting with President Bouteflika. Shortly thereafter, the Algerians lifted visa restrictions for Moroccan nationals and were planning to send Prime Minister Ouyahia to Morocco to

discuss, among other issues, re-opening the land border that has been closed since 1994.

In April 2005, the UNSC voted unanimously to extend MINURSO's mandate for an additional six months and reiterated its desire for a comprehensive review of the mission's civilian and administrative structure.

In May, Alvaro de Soto was named UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative to the PLO and PA.

In addition, the thaw between Morocco and Algeria was short-lived, and by early summer relations were again in a downward spiral, precipitated this time by Algerian public statements in support of independence for the Western Sahara. The Moroccan government reacted to the first of these statements by canceling the King's participation in the Arab Maghreb Union Summit scheduled for May in Tripoli. With the King's cancellation, the summit collapsed. The Moroccan government reacted to a subsequent Algerian statement by canceling the June visit of the Algerian Prime Minister.

A glimmer of hope came this August, when the parties were able to overcome some of their differences. With the support of many parties, including the U.S. Congress, Senator Lugar led a mission to Morocco, Algeria, and the Western Sahara that resulted in the Polisario Front releasing 404 long-held Moroccan prisoners of war (POWs). These men, among the longest-held POWs in the world, are now reunited with families and loved ones. This event helped to clear a long-standing obstacle to the peace process and was a true humanitarian success.

Still, the success of the Lugar Mission has not yet completely eased tensions between Morocco and Algeria. Both parties were able to overcome the slow-flowing rhetoric of last year to achieve consensus on the passage of a resolution on the Western Sahara at the 60th UN General Assembly, yet recent immigration problems involving Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish enclaves located adjacent to the Moroccan coastline, have been exploited by all sides as they continue to blame each other for the difficulties.

On October 31, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to extend MINURSO's mandate for an additional six months and called for a status report from new UN Envoy van Walsum after three months.

In the midst of a long political stalemate, we are mindful of the ongoing humanitarian cost of this dispute. Approximately 90,000 Sahrawi refugees continue to live a marginal existence in camps around Tindouf, Algeria. The exact number of refugees living in these camps is not known since there has never been a reliable census of the population.

There are credible reports that the Polisario Front has sold portions of international food aid on the black market. Chronic shortages of basic goods, whether due to diversion, inadequate storage facilities, or simply because there is not enough to go around, are common.

Allegations of Human Rights abuses remain persistent on all sides, and our annual Human Rights Report for Morocco, while noting considerable improvements on many fronts, still classifies Moroccan performance as poor throughout the nation, including Western Sahara. In turn, the Polisario has reportedly restricted freedom of movement and expression in its camps and in areas of the Western Sahara that it controls. Accounts of its treatment of former Moroccan POWs have been grim.

Mr. Chairman, we continue to seek a durable, peaceful, and mutually-acceptable solution to this dispute that takes into account the rights and well-being of all the involved parties and promotes the stability of the region.

The United States will not impose a solution. The parties themselves must agree on the way forward. While the Baker Peace Plan remains "an optimal solution," it is difficult to see how this plan, accepted by only two of the three parties, could be accepted or implemented.

We are hopeful that all parties will create an atmosphere that is ready for open and frank discussions. It is clear to us that a resolution of the Western Sahara dispute can only be approached in the context of much-improved Moroccan-Algerian relations. It is for this reason that we are focusing our efforts on improving the overall atmosphere in the region by encouraging Moroccan-Algerian rapprochement. Morocco, in turn, must also concentrate on opening a dialogue with the Polisario.

We continue to encourage the parties to work with the United Nations, and with each other, in a spirit of flexibility and compromise, to find a mutually acceptable settlement. We consult regularly with France, Spain, Russia, and the UK – collectively the “Friends of the Western Sahara” – and, whenever possible, coordinate our efforts to encourage a settlement. Morocco has recently expressed willingness to lay out of its plan for autonomy for the Western Sahara, and we have encouraged the Kingdom to put forward a strong proposal for all parties to examine.

We support, financially and morally, the UN’s confidence building measures, which have brought together more than 1,200 Sahrawis from both sides of the berm to renew family ties as part of the family visit program and allowed more than 12,000 Sahrawis to communicate via telephone. In addition, the U.S. supports the World Food Program’s assistance to the refugees around Tindouf.

In sum, we are attempting to encourage an atmosphere, both at the official and personal levels, conducive to resolving the Western Sahara dispute in a manner that respects all the parties involved and encourages regional stability. I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have.